

Mr. Cannon,

I am a 50 year old, nearly lifetime resident of Clinton Township. Although I am employed at St. John Home Care, I started attending Macomb Community College a couple years ago to earn an associates degree. Long story short, I recently took my first English class in 34 years. We had to write an essay about a "public space" we frequent. I chose the Civic Center because I have a deep appreciation for it. I want to share that essay with you so that you are aware of how important the Center is to the residents, and to thank the Township Board for its continued support of our parks and all of our public spaces. Following is the essay. Oh yes, I did receive an "A" for the assignment. Thank you for giving me something so special to write about.

Sincerely,

Sue

#### The Clinton Township Civic Center: A Magical Public Space

From my seat on the front porch of my house, I can hear the sound of a cheering crowd and imagine seeing the small, white ball sail across the open sky and land on the other side of the chain-link fence. I see a young boy throw his bat aside in triumph and begin a leisurely jog from home plate to first base. There is no need for him to hurry; he just hit a home run. I know what the sound means, because I hear it so often, along with the echoes of children shouting and laughing, the vibration of music playing, and voices emanating from a loud speaker. All proof of just another busy day at the Clinton Township Civic Center located just around the corner from my house. The Civic Center exists because we, the citizenry, want it to. We recognize how essential it is to our community. Far from being just a public space consisting of a plot of land with a structure thrown here or there, the Civic Center is a living and breathing entity that defines us, and we define it. Such a public space is vital for any community hoping to stay alive and flourish.

Public spaces are places that are open to all the citizens. They should represent and define the community in its entirety. Jona Bechtolt said it best in the article titled 'Public Domain' that appeared in the November 2006 issue of Good magazine. He stated, "There need to be places where the rich and poor, the cultivated and the self-made shall be attracted together and encouraged to assimilate." In other words, public spaces should offer attractions that appeal to everyone, regardless of their station in life, thereby encouraging everyone to come together. On any given day, the Clinton Township Civic Center is visited by both the young and old, black and white, and the rich and not-so rich. There we celebrate our diversity with activities, such as those planned for Hispanic Heritage month in September. We also honor those who have fought to protect and serve our democratic ideals, as we will do in the fall with an exhibition of "The Wall That Heals" in recognition of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. We don't stop there. The activities offered are numerous and varied enough to suit anyone's taste. The Center consists of not only a traditional park area, but also several added amenities.

For the elderly, there is a Senior Citizen Activity Center to meet and play cards, attend lectures, work on crafts, or take physical fitness classes. Outside of the Activity Center is an area set up for older folks to enjoy picnicking, shuffleboard, bocce ball, and horseshoes. Senior citizens have a

particular need for social interaction. Many have lost a spouse, and either have no children, or their children are grown. They are often lonely and need regular contact with others. By staying involved, they enrich their lives, while helping keep the community strong.

A meeting hall in the Senior Center hosts frequent guest speakers to discuss local and state politics, including upcoming legislation. It is a great forum to allow citizens to challenge and ask questions of political leaders, and explore the impact issues will have on them personally, and on the community as a whole. Citizens wanting further involvement in the local decision-making process can join the various committees the Township sponsors, such as Diversity, Conservation, Historic Preservation, and Parks and Recreation. All of these committees have a role in defining the Civic Center, as well as the other township public spaces. The Parks and Recreation Committee reserves spots on its board for student representatives from each of the two high schools in the township. It is important that the voice of the community youth be heard. This open and collaborative effort by all of our citizens ensures democracy has a strong foothold here. People join these committees because they appreciate and want to protect the assets we have. It is this caring about each other that sets us apart as a community and assures that we stand united in pursuit of a shared vision of peace and harmony.

Perhaps the greatest asset we have is our children. It is vitally important to give them a place where they can feel safe, while just having fun. There is no security offensive at the Civic Center. There are no gates, or security personnel. None is needed. We watch out for each other, and for all of the children. For the young ones visiting the Civic Center, there are swings and playscapes. From June through August of each year, children can attend summer camp for a nominal fee. The camp offers organized play, crafts, and nature adventures. Activities at the Center don't stop when the weather turns cold. In the winter, there is a sledding hill, and the basketball courts are turned into ice rinks.

The hiking trails are particularly popular with children all year round. For some, the trails are the only regular exposure they experience to the wilderness. In the article, 'The End of Childhood,' that appeared in the June 2008 issue of Adbusters magazine, author Paul Coopers maintains that, "We are now just beginning to understand that the growing disconnection between kids and the natural world is an increasingly serious social problem." The article cites research done by Dr. William Bird that shows a continuing increase in mental illness in children. The article goes on to claim that, "'Children undertaking activities in nature appear to improve symptoms of ADHD [Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder] by 30 percent compared to urban outdoor activities and threefold compared to the indoor environment,' notes Dr. Bird." While I don't think that disconnection from nature is the only cause of mental illness in children, I do believe it plays a role in the increase in social problems our society has witnessed in the past few decades. I can also see how nature activities could improve symptoms of ADHD. Exposure to nature has profound benefits for children. It sparks the curious mind and allows the imagination to roam free. It provides for exploration, focus, and analysis. In the words of Cooper, "A child using his imagination to play a game in the woods isn't just having fun; he's setting a foundation for future independence, inner strength and an ability to resist stress that will last a lifetime." I couldn't agree more.

Just as important as the need for children to connect to nature, is the need for people of all ages to engage in physical activity in order to maintain

health and vigor. In his 'Public Domain' article, Bechtolt states, "While the physical labor and industrial pollution of the 19th century called for passive parks where people could rest and breathe fresh air, landscape architect Ken Smith suggests that 'today a big need is really physical activity—getting people to walk and move and run and bicycle.'" The importance of providing opportunities for physical activity is not lost at the Center. There the energetic, young and old, can take advantage of the basketball and tennis courts, as well as the volleyball nets. A bike trail runs along the perimeter of the Center, with plans to extend the trail to connect with other local parks. Even organized sport has a home at the Center. There are five baseball diamonds, six soccer fields, and two flag football fields on the grounds. Teams consisting of all ages play there, from Pee Wee to Senior, and all abilities, from special needs to advanced skills.

If the goal for visiting the Center is pure relaxation, there are plenty of offerings for that. A pond is kept stocked for residents who enjoy fishing. Those fishing don't seem to mind the rule that the fish must be thrown back in. Pet lovers can take advantage of the enclosed "dog park" to allow their canine friends to run free. There are two large pavilions for families and friends to gather and have a picnic. The Civic Center is also home to Macomb County's largest library, the Clinton-Macomb Library. The parking lot of the library is always full. There are dozens of planned activities each month, from family film nights to weekly story telling hours for children.

For those wanting entertainment with their relaxation, the ultimate destination is the gazebo where regularly scheduled live music fills the air in the summer months. During concerts, the hillside leading down to the stage is packed with people of all ages, some resting on lawn chairs and blankets, others up and dancing to the music. When not being used for concerts, the gazebo is often the background for picture taking of young people dressed up for prom night, and newlywed couples. The gazebo is in the part of the Center known as the Historic Village. The Village has public restrooms, a concession stand, and two historic buildings (the Moravian Schoolhouse and the Township Hall) that were relocated from their original sites in the township. The structures add definition to our communal identity by representing those that came before us and their dedication to building a democratic society within the township boundaries.

In his article, Bechtolt says, "Central Park showed us that public spaces can embody the ideals and aspirations of a society." He goes on to state, "Central Park, completed in 1873 and occupying 843 acres, established great public spaces as essential to American democracy and urban life." Although the Civic Center is not as grand in scale as Central Park, and is not located in an urban area, the ideals and aspirations of a democratic society are just as important there. Dan Kildee, in his article titled "Bulldozing Cities" that appeared in the October 2009 issue of Good magazine, points out that, "The quality of a city is determined by what life is like for the people who live there—not by how many people live there." It is that quality of life that has been so enriched by the Civic Center.

Even in these tough financial times, as a community we have pledged ourselves to the standard that our quality of life will not be dependent on the economy. The public spaces in Clinton Township have survived because the citizens value them enough to pass millages and offer full political and financial support to the cause. Unfortunately, this has not been the situation in some other local communities. For example, in the City of Troy, the recent failure to pass a millage led to substantial cuts in community

services and may be the end of some of their community places. Their community center and library are scheduled to close in 2011. The uproar by its largely upscale citizens who are angered by the impending cuts has been amazing. Perhaps they should have recognized that these places are vital to their community before they cast, or refused to cast, their votes. In comparison, our citizens recognize that it is imperative, particularly during tough times, to keep public spaces open as a source of entertainment for our families. To assist with the financial resources needed, our township governing body has formed partnerships with local businesses to sponsor many of the free activities and events offered.

The Civic Center defines our community more than anywhere else. From the earliest moments of life through the waning years, our citizens gather there to celebrate who we are. We come together at the Center to marvel at the firework displays on holidays, and showcase ourselves with the annual Festival of the Senses art fair. We attend concerts, and host political rallies, such as the Tea Party rally a few months ago that drew thousands of people from around the country. We welcome everyone, regardless of gender, age, race, mental or physical ability, economic status, or political persuasion. We recognize the importance of having an open public space that allows people to meet and intermingle with others that may be different from themselves. It is through this interaction that the fear of the unknown disappears and acceptance and harmony take its place. Unlike in some cities, where neighborhoods seem to develop along ethnic or racial lines, the township doesn't have that separation. Everyone is equal here.

Jason Eppink in his article titled, "There's No Such Thing as Bad Publicity," summed up how special public spaces are perfectly. "Public space belongs to everyone: you, people you know, people you don't know, and people you'll never know. And that mystery is magical. Anything can happen because everyone is invited." The article that appeared in the October 2009 issue of Good magazine was about displaying Eppink's artwork in public, but it was his description of public space as "magical" that I found intriguing. Having a public space that provides endless opportunities for anyone, and everyone, to explore and define, truly is magic. In my community, that magical place is our Civic Center. Without it, we would be less than we are. We would lose the lively and democratic communal character that we so pride ourselves in. We would cease to attract new people, or retain those we have. Our community would decline to the point of being just another geographic location. That is not going to happen here.